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Exploring relative deprivation: Is social comparison a mechanism in the relation between income and health?

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Abstract

During the last decade there has been a growing interest in the relation between income and health. The discussion has mostly focused on the individual's relative standing in the income distribution with the implicit understanding that the absolute level of income is not as relevant when the individual's basic needs are fulfilled. This study hypothesises relative deprivation to be a mechanism in the relation between income and health in Sweden: being relatively deprived in comparison to a reference group causes a stressful situation, which might affect self-rated health. Reference groups were formed by combining indicators of social class, age and living region, resulting in 40 reference groups. Within each of these groups a mean income level was calculated and individuals with an income below 70% of the mean income level in the reference group were considered as being relatively deprived. The results showed that more women than men were relatively deprived, but the effect of relative deprivation on self-rated health was more pronounced among men than among women. In order to estimate the importance of the effect of relative income versus the effect of absolute income, some analyses on the effect of relative deprivation on self-rated health were also carried out within different absolute income levels. When restricting the analysis to the lowest 40% of the income span the effect of relative deprivation almost disappeared. Relative deprivation may have a significant relation to health among men. However, for the 40% with the lowest income in the population the effect of relative deprivation on health is considerably reduced, possibly due to the more prominent relation between low absolute income and poor health.

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Introduction

During the last decade research on the relation between income and health has been studied on both individual and ecological level, where income inequality has been shown to affect morbidity and mortality rates (Wilkinson, 1992, 1996; Kennedy, Kawachi, &

Prothrow-Stith, 1996; Kawachi & Kennedy, 1997; Lynch & Kaplan, 1997; Wolfson, Kaplan, Lynch, Ross, & Backlund, 1999). Critique and other interpretations have been raised (Judge, 1995; Lynch, Kaplan, & Shema, 1997; Fiscella & Franks, 1997; Gravelle, 1998; Mackenbach, 2002; Osler et al., 2002) and, recently, this ecological relationship has been argued to not be valid outside the United States (Mackenbach, 2002). A Danish study analysed whether income inequality at the parish level predicted increased mortality after adjustment for individual income. Their result showed no such relation, but could confirm the inverse relation between individual income and mortality (Osler et al., 2002).

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Focusing on the importance of the individual's relative standing in the income distribution more than the absolute income level (Wilkinson, 1992, 1996; Kennedy, Kawachi, & Prothrow-Stith, 1996; Kaplan, Pamuk, Lynch, Cohen, & Balfour, 1996) implies a mechanism of relative deprivation. Within the discussion on different pathways and interpretations within the income inequality and health relation (Kawachi & Kennedy, 1999; Lynch, Davey Smith, Kaplan, & House, 2000) the mechanism of relative deprivation has previously been mentioned (Kawachi & Kennedy, 1999), but rarely used in analyses (see, however, Lundberg & Fritzell, 1994). This study aims to explore the mechanism of relative deprivation when analysing the income–health relation.

Relative deprivation and reference groups

Relative deprivation is often seen as a process in which people compare their circumstances to the circumstances of others (Runciman, 1966) or compare their circumstances in relation to a set of objective circumstances or at least the individual's perception of such circumstances (Townsend, 1979). The concept relative deprivation was introduced by Stouffer, Suchman, De Vinney, Star, and Williams (1949), who compared individuals with different opportunities for promotion. Opposite to what one might expect, they found that satisfaction with opportunities was better among those with less opportunities. Their interpretation was that when more individuals shared the lack of opportunities, poor circumstances are easier to live with. Similar objective conditions may therefore be experienced quite differently depending on whether they are regarded as normal or not.

Runciman (1966) argues that “the idea of relative deprivation, obvious though it is, provides the key to the complex and fluctuating relation between inequality and grievance” (Runciman 1966, p. 6). Runciman emphasises the importance of reference group selection in order to determine whether or not individuals are relatively deprived. A reference group must not be a group, it might be a single person or an abstract idea. Runciman differentiates between a comparative group, which is the group whose situation or attributes a person contrasts with his own, and the normative group from which the person takes his standards. These two may, and often do, overlap. He also notes the space and time dimension of comparisons, i.e. that the individual compares the situation with others at the same time or with oneself at an earlier time. Every individual could belong to an almost infinite number of reference groups, because of every different attribute that the individual shares with others. However, in the perspective of relative depriva-

tion it is only relevant if related to feelings about inequality.

The notion of reference groups becomes important, since it is crucial to how individuals set up their expectations. There is no theoretical or empirical consensus on how the individual compares his or her situation. Merton and Rossi (1950) argue that the reference group could be a group with whom the individual has an actual relation, a membership group, or no actual relation: a non-membership group. Individuals or groups forming the base for the comparison may be of the same status or of a different status, higher, lower or unranked, as the individual. As a base for the comparison process, a distinction can be made between social groups and social categories, where social groups imply interaction within the group and social categories no interaction (Gartrell, 1987; Bygren, 2001). Individuals within the same work organisation is one example of a social group, whereas similar or comparable others outside the work organisation, albeit at the same occupational level, rather is a social category.

In this study we have formed reference groups from variables assumed relevant for the individual's position in the social system, thereby linking the reference group to traditional conflict lines in industrial societies. The main problem is to define criteria from which we choose these social groups or categories and to what extent these criteria are applicable and relevant across individuals. In relation to competitive consumerism Schor (1999) mentions Duesenberry's discussion from the 1950s of “keeping up with the Joneses”, where the Joneses were the middle-class American neighbour in suburban USA, who people strive to be like or a bit ahead of. Schor argues that class, education, income, occupation and gender matter most in determining a reference group. Trying to understand the social comparison process by conducting a survey at Telecom, Schor asked respondents which their most important reference group was. The primary reference groups were friends (28.2%), co-workers (22.1%), relatives (12.1%), others of same religion (11.4%), others in same occupation (8.9%). Surprisingly, only 2.2% responded that neighbours were the primary reference group.¹

¹Media and information technology might also form normative reference groups. Schor (1999) argues TV to inflate our sense of what is normal and possibly also to have some impact on the feelings of relative deprivation, but it was not included as an alternative in her study. Lynch and Kaplan (1997) argue individuals' relative position in the social hierarchy not only to be referenced by the neighbourhood, city or state, but also television allows us to make comparisons across a wider range of social, economic, behavioural and cultural settings.

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